Steven Carroll, *The Time We Have Taken* (Fourth Estate, 2007)

*The Time We Have Taken* is the third novel in Steven Carroll’s trilogy, taking the narrative of a Melbourne family, Vic, Rita and their son Michael, begun in the late 1950s with *The Art of the Engine Driver* (2001), into the early 1970s. The first two novels were shortlisted for the Miles Franklin: with *The Time We Have Taken* he has finally won.

Carroll is a poet of the quotidian. His people are extraordinary not because of what they do or how they behave but because everyone is extraordinary. *The Art of the Engine Driver* begins with the simplest of scenes: ‘They’re walking down the old street again, Rita, Vic and the boy, Michael’ (3). It takes nearly two-thirds of the book for them to reach the end of the street where a neighbour is holding a party, but although little happens during their walk, the narrative fans out backwards and forwards in time, and into the lives of the people who live on this suburban street in a raw new suburb to the north of Melbourne.

But note that they are walking down the street ‘again’, although this is the beginning of the first book. Already we are experiencing déjà vu. This scene in particular will be revisited several times over the course of the two later sequels. At the end of *The Time We Have Taken* Michael remembers in a dream this walk down the street with his parents, perhaps twelve years earlier:

Eleven or twelve, he will always be walking down the old street and wearing his best summer shirt with the button-down collars that he had forgotten all about until this dream retrieved it, his father just ahead with his ear turned to the sound of a distant engine, and his mother beside him in a floral dress that is just a bit too good for the street. (325-6)

Time is elastic: past, present and future all exist together: ‘The time we have taken is no more or less than it takes for a dreamer to roll over in bed and wake from the dream’ (325). Carroll’s writing has a remarkable, hypnotic stillness. His books are more concerned with states of mind and situations than actions and events, despite his characters’ restlessness and hankering for speed and action. He is always seeking the one moment on which everything hinges: the moment when two people recognise something in each other, or when someone comes to understand a fact which will shape the future. It is a style which owes something perhaps to Ian McEwan, and further back to Henry James, but Carroll makes it his own:

A small transistor radio breaks into song from the shadowy banks of the pond and spreads through the quiet evening air. It is a familiar, silly song and they both turn their heads back towards the source of this disturbance. ‘Tedious’ is the word that floats across Michael’s mind as he listens to the familiar lyrics of this popular summer song. Tedious. The word is not new to him because Michael is a reader. But it is not a word he would use among his school friends. … It is a word that needs to be shared with the right friend. And Kathleen Marsden is just the one to

share this observation with; but not just yet. … And it is while he is slowly shaking his head from side to side, while that tiny transistor radio continues to fill the entire arc of the horizon with its silliness, and while he is imagining a point at which Kathleen Marsden just might become Kate, that her lips slowly open and a single word drops quietly from them, while she too shakes her head slowly from side to side.


Words and phrases are repeated like musical leitmotifs: Rita wears dresses that are ‘just a bit too good for the street’; Vic still ‘turns his cheek to the wind’, as he had in the cabin of his engine during his thwarted career as a driver; Michael looks forward to the day he will bowl the perfect ball, ‘the ball that will become known all across the suburb as the ball that Michael bowled.’ There are cultural references which fix the narrative in a time and place, but the narrator always seems to be viewing them from a distance, as if from another planet.

It’s easy to see in Michael the sensibility of the writer taking shape:

Michael has always been one of those who looks back on a moment even as he is living it. He closes the purple front door behind them and it is doors that he is contemplating: his, hers, and the length of doors that once opened and closed daily on his old street. … These doors, the doors of his life, they are all vivid. And he can, too, quite clearly, imagine himself at some distant point in time when this night is behind them, standing on the footpath some bright spring or winter’s day, contemplating Madeleine’s old front door, as it will be then, and the time they once shared. *How terribly strange to be seventy.* *(The Time We Have Taken 300)*

This line from Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘Bookends’ has occurred earlier, though the song is never named: cultural references like this are only present as part of something much larger, the warp and weft of interconnected lives. Especially in this last book of the trilogy, the feeling of the network is strong. Rita at home in the old suburb, Vic in the New South Wales north-coast town he has escaped to, Michael in his urban university life; all are connected through the narrative by its description of their simultaneous activities. There is a modicum of political satire – Whitlam makes an appearance, when he comes to the suburb as opposition leader to perform some ceremonial duty:

This mountainous statue on wheels will roll inexorably to power in just a couple of years . . . . So, even though his face betrays no emotion, this Whitlam is acknowledging deep in his core that all landscapes, especially those as flat as the pancake suburbs around him, require mountains. *(The Time We Have Taken 271)*

The deadpan irony appears again when Michael’s artist friend Mulligan unveils his historical mural, painted for the suburb’s new council building, and the townsfolk are puzzled by the appearance of aboriginal people in the prehistory of the area. But politics

is not Carroll’s target. He’s more interested in the interplay of perspectives – the points of view that show the subtle misunderstandings and misperceptions between classes and generations as well as within the most intimate relationships.

Carroll’s achievement is quite extraordinary in its subtlety and poise. His style could easily lapse into tedium and self-parody, but he sustains the most delicate balance throughout these three novels, a feat which holds the reader mesmerised to the end.

Gillian Dooley